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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE  
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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3455  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3319  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3985  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1182  
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3963  
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

UNCLAS ASHGABAT 001258

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: PUBLIC LOSING PATIENCE WITH FREQUENT ROAD CLOSURES

¶1. (U) Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet distribution

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Road closures in Ashgabat to provide security for the president and his VIP foreign guests have become a frequent practice. While VIP visitors no doubt appreciate the gesture, locals are becoming increasingly irritated by road closures that cause traffic jams, car accidents, stress and late arrival to destinations. Neither police nor city officials provide advance notice to the public about closures or detours. The increasing number of vehicles on Ashgabat's underdeveloped road network worsens the problem, as well as does reconstruction of roads in the vicinity of the expanding presidential palace. The issue will continue to generate dissatisfaction among the public until authorities take action to address the problem. END SUMMARY.

ROAD CLOSED ... OFTEN

¶3. (SBU) Traffic police frequently close roads in Ashgabat not only for construction or repair work, but to ensure the security of the president and his VIP guests while traveling in the city. While in recent years, an increasing number of cars has made traffic a headache, closure of roads for movement of VIPs turns the available streets into traffic chaos. At such moments, the few remaining traffic arteries become totally jammed, with drivers forced to sit in traffic and drive far out of their way to reach their destinations.

SAFETY OF PRESIDENTIAL MOVEMENT

¶4. (SBU) At the beginning of his presidency, Berdimuhamedov, highly concerned about his security, ordered the routes of his movement "sanitized" of people and vehicles. According to an Ashgabat resident who lives in a high-rise apartment building along one of the president's frequent routes, "When the president's cortege is to drive by our street, Ministry of National Security officers give residents of our building short notice not to open windows until well after the cortege has passed." The sealing off of roads also happens when the president uses the airport and during the inauguration of construction projects, at which the president is always the guest of honor. According to an Ashgabat resident, "When

the new textile factory near the airport was inaugurated, I almost missed my flight to Moscow because the traffic police closed all the roads in that area," due to the president attending the ceremony.

#### WELCOME TO ASHGABAT

15. (SBU) Road closures happen more often nowadays because Ashgabat hosts more high level delegations. For instance, over the past three weeks, four presidents visited the country. Turkmen authorities, trying to pamper foreign guests by providing traffic free roads, irritate their own public. The first problem of this kind in Ashgabat occurred when Afghan President Karzai visited the country. The high security measures taken for this official created a mess in the city. The most recent traffic chaos was caused when roads were closed during Ukrainian President Yushchenko's visit. During one such road closure, when a taxi driver was asked the reason for the traffic jam, he said "I guess Yashuly ("the Elder" meaning the president) is going somewhere or a foreign guest is in town."

#### AUTHORITIES' INACTION

16. (SBU) Neither police nor city officials inform the public in advance about the supposed movement of VIP motorcades. Even pedestrians become victims of road closures because they are not allowed to move along the closed streets. As a result, many Ashgabat residents are late to work, and massive traffic jams occur on the available streets, sometimes causing car accidents. One recent example was the September 1 inauguration of the Institute of Transport and Communications that was attended by the country's leadership. It resulted in massive traffic jams and delays to offices and schools, as well as stress, anger and grumpiness among

many people. Since the Institute is located near the Embassy, most Embassy employees arrived to work at least 30 minutes late, leaving their cars parked far from the Embassy and picking them up later when the roads opened. One FSN said "If I knew I would be trapped in such a mess, I would have come by taxi to save my time and my car."

#### HISTORY OF ROAD CLOSURE

17. (SBU) The practice of road closures is not new to Ashgabat. They started during President Niyazov's regime. Niyazov would himself drive his official Mercedes and traffic police would block the roads along his route to ensure his security and unimpeded movement. However, before the alleged assassination attempt in November 2002, the road closures applied only to cars, not to pedestrians. During Berdimuhamedov's presidency, the road closures have become a more frequent practice and cover longer time periods and geographical distances.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: The problem of road closures and resulting traffic hassles will continue until municipal authorities find a way to solve the problem by improving road infrastructure. It seems that the government has realized the problem, if the recent visit by Saint Petersburg Governor Valentina Matvienko is any indication. During her visit, Berdimuhamedov approved a contract with a Russian firm for design and construction of seven new roads, together with overpasses and bridges. Its planned completion in May 2012 won't be a moment too soon for Ashgabat drivers. END COMMENT.

#### CURRAN